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ABSTRACT

In 1981, a study was conducted at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) to determine if a correlation exists between the general anxiety and writing anxiety of returning college students and to assess these levels of anxiety before and after participation in a freshman composition course. Student volunteers from 21 composition classes at NVCC were administered the Anxiety Scale Questionnaire prepared by the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing (IPAT) and the Thompson Attitude Scale (TAS), designed to measure writing anxiety. Scores were obtained for 154 students during the first and final weeks of the quarter. Results of the study included: (1) a correlation appeared between general anxiety and writing anxiety in both first and last week scores; (2) returning students (those over 22 years of age) showed lower levels of general anxiety at course entry and exit than younger freshmen; (3) returning males showed considerable lower writing anxiety than younger students or returning females; (4) returning students exhibited a significant reduction in writing anxiety between entry and exit scores; (5) in responding to the TAS, returning students expressed anxiety about skills generally taught in freshman English (e.g., vocabulary, organizing material, and getting started in writing); and (6) only females under 22 showed a decrease in general anxiety from entry to exit scores. The study report relates findings to informal teacher observations. The TAS is appended. (KL)

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THE RETURNING STUDENT:
WRITING ANXIETY AND GENERAL ANXIETY

by

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Northern Virginia Community College
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Presented at
Northeast Regional Conference
English in the Two Year College
Baltimore, 1981

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We recognize them during day classes. He sits at the back of the room, age 50's or 60's, uncomfortable in a freshman composition class required to get his Real Estate license. Or, he sits at the side, age 30's, 40's, frantic about passing English to get his Data Processing degree through Vocational Rehabilitation training, available because he has been disabled on his construction job. We see her sitting in the front row --age 40's, a new tote bag beside her holding a complete set of pencils and paper for her "big step" out of the empty nest. Or, we see them all, ages 25 up in our night classes, running a merry-go-round to catch up on what they "missed" 10-20 years previously.

We label them the "anxious returning student." They are polite and respectful, but they dog our steps, fill our office hours, drain our knowledge, and most often are our best students. An "A" is what they want and is often what they get.

For several years, the focus of my research has been on writing anxiety. In 1979,at a 4C's presentation, an audience member questioned me about research correlating the general anxiety of a returning student and the recognized phenomenon of writing anxiety. Though we both presumed that both anxieties would be high, and the correlation positive, I knew of no research. The next year I applied for and received a grant to study the correlation between general anxiety and writing anxiety of first year college students.[1]

To assess levels of general anxiety I chose,in consultation with a college counselor, the Anxiety Scale Questionnaire published by the Institute For Personality and Ability Testing. It is a 40 item group test designed to be brief and non-stressful for ages 15 through adult, giving an accurate appraisal of general anxiety level. It is easily scored, offering both a composite score, two separate scores measuring covert (cryptic) and over (manifest) anxiety, and five subscores on the primary traits of general anxiety: apprehension, tension, low self-control, emotional instability, and suspicion.[2]

To assess levels of writing anxiety, I chose my own Thompson Attitude Survey. Standardized in 1978, it is a 30 item Likert Scale, which was designed to measure fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write.[3]

At the beginning of Fall Quarter, 1980, I arranged with faculty from the five Northern Virginia Community College campuses for a pool of students to take these two tests: ten teachers from the five campuses volunteered 21 classes of English 111. Students were advised of their right to voluntary participation. To provide the age divisions and "returning student" data, participants verified that they had not attended any college classes during the previous five years, and checked their age as "under 22," or "over 22." "Over 22" was considered a "returning student." A pool of 294 students from four campuses took the tests during the first week of Fall, 1981. One hundred fifty-four students completed the tests at the end of the quarter: 50 males under 22 years of age, 51 females under 22,

14 males over 22, and 39 females over 22. The study produced 154 sets of scores, both entering and exiting scores on general anxiety (IPAT) and writing anxiety (WA).

The 154 sets of raw scores were submitted to various statistical analyses.

First, to understand if there is any correlation between general anxiety and writing anxiety, a correlation was made between the IPAT scores and the WA scores. For the entering scores, a product-moment correlation r=.53 was obtained. Since a 95 percent confidence interval computed from this data would extend from .35 to .65, there is strong evidence of association between general anxiety and writing anxiety. For the exiting scores, a product-moment correlation r=.6 was obtained. A 95 percent confidence interval computed from this data would extend from .5 to .7, offering even stronger evidence of association between general anxiety and writing anxiety. Such association supports teacher observations that any general anxiety exhibited by students will show itself in manifestations of writing anxiety: late papers, non-existent papers, hastily written papers, poorly developed papers, students who drop out of a writing class, and students who procrastinate taking writing classes.

The means of raw scores are shown below.

	Entering		Exiting	
	IPAT	WA	IPAT	WA
Total Population (N=154)	20.5	85.5	20.7	80.3
Males under 22 (N=50)	21.1	86.8	21.9	87.1
Males over 22 (N=14	20.2	84.0	21.5	78.0
Females under 22 (N=51)	23.0	85.3	21.8	88.0
Females over 22 (N=39)	20.8	86.3	21.4	82.0

The IPAT maual places scores ranging from 20-22 in the 23rd percentile for a college population.[4] Therefore, the total population of the study exhibited relatively low general anxiety as measured by the IPAT, both on entering and exiting English 111. Such low general anxiety would generally support teacher observations about students. NVCC students generally hold jobs while pursuing studies, leading busy lives that would require a high level of emotional stability.

However, the data on returning students is interesting. The IPAT scores show lower levels of general anxiety than the scores for their younger counterparts both on entering and exiting a freshman composition class. Lower than average levels of general anxiety violates our expectations. We would expect the returning students to show higher levels of anxiety.

Standardized scores on the Thompson attitude survey place average WA score at 88 for entering freshman composition students, and average WA score at 82 on exiting.[5] The WA scores of returning students also violate teacher expectations in some ways. We would expect them to have higher writing anxiety than the regular college age student. The data shows only the returning females have higher writing anxiety on entering, and that is very slight. Returning males have a considerably lower writing anxiety score than their younger students. These differences, though not statistically significant, are interesting.

We also expect males generally to have higher writing anxiety than

females.[6] In this study the returning males had considerably lower writing anxiety than returning females on entering English 111. We might consider that returning males often come with some writing experience from previous jobs; returning females often do not. On exiting, scores show returning males to have kept their advantage over both younger males and younger and older females. But the gap between returning males and returning females has widened. Again, we might consider that the returning male has usually some successful work experience behind him on which to build. When provided with skills,he can often build self-assurance quickly.

Besides discovering levels of anxiety, I wanted to discover whether the freshman composition process affected these levels of anxiety. Computation of the differences between the sets of entering and exiting scores were made.

The t test on differences between paired means:

$$t = \frac{\Sigma D}{\sqrt{\frac{[N\Sigma D^2 - (\Sigma D)^2]}{N - 1}}}$$

applied to the data indicated the following:

Total Population: the changes in both general anxiety and writing anxiety were not significant.

Males Under 22: the changes in both general anxiety and writing anxiety were not significant.

Males over 22: the change in general anxiety was not significant.

the reduction in writing anxiety was significant. ($t=1.95$, $df=14$, $p<.10$).

Females under 22: the reduction in general anxiety was significant. ($t=1.24$, $df=51$, $p<.10$). The change in writing anxiety was not significant.

Females over 22: the change in general anxiety was not significant. The reduction in writing anxiety was significant. ($t=1.24$, $df=39$, $p<.20$)

When the differences between entering and exiting scores were compared, only the reduction of general anxiety in females under 22 was significant. The other three groups showed increased general anxiety but not at significant levels. The data may indicate that college women under 22 benefit from the college experience in reduced tension and generally improved emotional stability.

The reduced writing anxiety in males and females over 22 was significant. Such results would confirm teacher observations that returning students benefit in reduced writing anxiety more than regular students from writing instruction in a freshman composition class. We might consider that their writing anxiety on entering the class may be inappropriate, and therefore most amenable to reduction after instruction.

To further understand the increase and decrease in general anxiety and writing anxiety of returning students, I examined individual sets of scores on the tests. On the IPAT, of the 30 students who showed an increase in general anxiety of more than 5 points during the quarter, only 6 were returning students. Of the 21 students who

showed a decrease in general anxiety of more than 5 points during the quarter of more than 5 points during the quarter, only 4 were returning students. On the WA, of the 19 students who showed an increase in writing anxiety of more than 10 points, only 3 were older students. Of the 21 who showed a decrease in writing anxiety of more than 10 points, 9 were older students. Only in reduced writing anxiety did the returning students appear in numbers proportionate to their relative number in the population. It seems the returning students exhibit smaller shifts in anxiety than their younger peers, even considering their lower scores as a base.

To further understand the dimensions of the general anxiety and the writing anxiety of returning students, I examined the subscores on the IPAT and item scores on the WA. Catell says that the two subscores on the IPAT that most contribute to general anxiety are apprehension and tension.[7] In this study subscores on these two components went up several points for returning students, though the differences were not judged significant. Here is a list of the traits that are tested under these two subscores, and some observations about returning students at NVCC.

APPREHENSION (Guilt Proneness)	WRITING CLASS AFFECTS
unstable	movement to college may be stabilizing
unable to sleep - worrying	apprehension gets focused before declining
unequal to challenges of daily life	high for college at first, but coping mechanisms learned fast
easily downhearted	generally not quitters
remorseful (sorrow)	constantly worrying after turning in papers

high scorers do not feel accepted or free to speak in groups	fear of acceptance by students who are younger
ineffective speakers	rarely
rigidly task oriented in remarks	rarely - it's usually the younger students who want to know how long the paper should be etc.
select few peers as friends	usually the older women do, using our women's center
unsuccessful in face-to-face interviews	rarely

TENSION	WRITING CLASS AFFECTS
general frustration	not evident in class
anger	maturity gives self-control
pugnacity	sometimes will argue over grades
anxiety, depression	freshman composition classes usually give room for self-expression

On the WA items #3,#6, #13, #14, #28, and #29 were the items most checked by returning students. These items concern such writing skills as finding the right word, getting started writing, imposing organization, and overcoming the panic and avoidance defenses. These are the skills that are taught in class. Usually some of the anxiety is alleviated with skill practice.

In summary: There is strong evidence of association between general anxiety and writing anxiety. The study population at Northern Virginia Community College exhibited relatively low general anxiety. The IPAT scores of returning students show lower levels of general anxiety than the scores for their younger counterparts both on entering and exiting a freshman

composition class. On the WA, only the returning females have higher writing anxiety on entering; returning males have a considerably lower writing anxiety score than the younger students, and than returning females. Computation of the differences between the sets of entering and exiting scores showed that returning students had a significant reduction in writing anxiety. Returning students seem to exhibit smaller shifts in anxiety than their younger peers. On IPAT subscores of Apprehension and Tension, returning students scored slightly higher on exiting though the differences were not significant. On the WA, items most checked were skills that are usually drilled in a freshman composition class, alleviating anxiety.

This study should encourage returning students that their anxieties will be short lived. Instructors have verification that returning students will cause little disruption in the class because of their anxieties.

ENDNOTES

[1]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "An Assessment of Manifest Anxiety and of Writing Anxiety Among Entering Students at Northern Virginia Community College," Report, College Development Grant, Northern Virginia Community College, 1981.

[2]Samuel E. Krup and others, Handbook for the IPAT Anxiety Scale (Champaign, Ill.: Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, 1976). For a copy of the text see appendix A.

[3]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of a Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition" (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, 1978). For a copy of the test see appendix B.

[4]Krup, p.18.

[5]Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation...," p. 76.

[6]John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension in the Classroom: Teacher Role Expectancies of the Apprehensive Writer," Research in the Teaching of English 13(1979): 37-44.

[7]Krup, pp. 39-40.

THOMPSON WRITING ATTITUDE SURVEY

Name_____

DIRECTIONS: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by writing a number in the space at the left of each statement.

5.....strongly disagree
4.....disagree
3.....neutral or undecided
2.....agree
1.....strongly agree

___1. Writing in a diary gives me a sense of having accomplished something with my day.
___2. I always do well in English Composition.
___3. When I write I can never find the right word.
___4. It is a joy to transform feelings by writing onto a blank piece of paper.
___5. Writing is not difficult for me.
___6. I don't feel I can find the right words to write what I want to say.
___7. Writing enables me to search myself more deeply than talking does.
___8. Writing is a chore for me.
___9. When I have to do a writing assignment I panic.
__10. I enjoy becoming involved with the flow of ideas in writing words.
__11. When I hand in a paper in class I hide it in the bottom or middle of the stack.
__12. People think my writing is childish.
__13. I can never seem to get my ideas organized.
__14. When I try to write I have trouble getting started.
__15. I can not satisfy the requirements of English teachers when I write.
__16. When I want to solve a personal problem I write all the issues involved.
__17. Writing helps me to decide what I think about a subject.
__18. Writing is freeing.
__19. When I am given a writing assignment I put off doing it until the last minute.
__20. I like to write my feelings about things in personal writing.
__21. I've always received good grades on writing assignments.
__22. My teachers make positive comments on my papers about my writing.
__23. Writing gives me a chance to convey my sense of reality.
__24. I enjoy writing when I have time.
__25. Discussing my writing with others is enjoyable.
__26. People who write well are people who think clearly.
__27. My writing makes sense to me, but not to my teachers.
__28. I avoid writing.
__29. Thinking about writing makes my mind go blank.
__30. I don't like my peers to read my essays.

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THOMPSON WRITING ATTITUDE SURVEY
(con'td.)

SCORING: Change the score on these items: 3,6,8,9,11,12,13,14,15,19,27,28,29,30
changing 5 to 1
4 to 2
2 to 4
1 to 5
3 remains

Total all 30 items. The resulting scores could range from 150 (high anxiety) to 30 (low anxiety). Standardized test scores: on Pre-test, a range 124-62 median 88, mean 88; Post-test, range 120-60, median 78, mean 81.9.

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